

THE ROLE OF ENGLISH FOR ACADEMIC PURPOSES IN MAINTAINING FUTURE TEACHERS' INTEREST IN RESEARCH

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The university curriculum plays a role in motivating students to take up research. This 2-year action research explored the curriculum in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and its influence on student further engagement in research work. The data were collected from University Master's students through two questionnaires given to them before and after studying the course. An explanatory framework for the course characteristics that affected students' attitudes towards research focused upon the students' profile (the students' age, gender, major and language proficiency), career orientation and research orientation. The shift in students' attitudes reinforced the complexity of factors that influenced their motivation to take up research after graduation. The authors draw a conclusion that future interventions to address issues with the Academic English course to raise the interest of University students should deal with restructuring the course in a way that the student should have more contact hours. The analysis of learning materials designed for the EAP course shows that most of them introduce students to theory- and research-informed perspectives and guide them in putting theory to use in real-world contexts which would be impossible in 30 contact hours as in the analysed case. Moreover, it should be linked to the students' school practice and their small-scale research in real classroom settings.

Keywords: future teachers' attitudes towards research; English for Academic Purposes; maintaining interest in research

Introduction

Pre-service teacher education is viewed as essential in the students' motivation to take up research, and studies regarding impacts on student attitudes toward classroom research are timely and relevant. The authors explored the curriculum in English for Academic Purposes for Master's students majoring in teaching and its influence on their further engagement in research work.

Literature review. Over the past few decades, a lot of researchers have studied the impact of English as a foreign language on students' attitudes towards different academic and non-academic aspects. There has been some evidence that second language learner expectations are underpinned through the beliefs that are shaped in terms of their cultural backgrounds and past experiences (Borg, 2018). Other researchers have shown the impact of academic writing on the students in terms of their wish to publish their research findings as "universities are competing globally with each other to produce more and more research publications" (Abdulsada & Awad, 2020). As English has become the predominant language of communication in the academic field, the role of English for Academic Purposes as a university course is growing. According to Hyland and Hamp-Lyons (2002), English for Academic Purposes is defined as "the linguistic, sociolinguistic and psycholinguistic description of English as it occurs in the contexts of academic study and the scholarly exchange itself" (Hyland & Hamp-Lyons, 2002). The authors see the purpose of the course as bridging "the gap between secondary and tertiary expectations of academic discourse to promote the students' academic literacy up to graduation" (Hyland, 2006). Past research has shown that students who use English in their academic work tend to have difficulties in properly referring to sources (Mounce, 2010; Lamptey & Atta-Obeng, 2012; Masic, 2013). There are plentiful publications that are extensively focusing largely on academic integrity (McLean, 2018; Harrison, et al., 2017; Richards, et al., 2016). Although there is a lot of research about students' perception of English for Academic Purposes as a course (Bolton & Kuteeva, 2012; Olvera, 2014; Anwar & Wardhono, 2019) or curriculum research (Kong, 2018), there are practically no publications revealing the connection of the course at the MA level and the future teachers' attitudes towards research in their school practice or further taking a postgraduate course.

The theoretical background of the research

The research is based on the assumption that the quality of school education depends on teachers' ability to adapt to the students' needs. As this can be achieved by doing research in both academic and classroom settings it is important that the courses in the pre-service teacher education programmes should develop the students' positive attitudes towards research. The theoretical background of the study lays on curriculum theory seeing a curriculum as "a way to respond to the challenges of contemporary society and acquiesce to the demands of efficiency" (Linden, Annala, & Coate, 2017, p. 7).

The idea is widely applicable to the curriculum design in higher education which is supposed to be flexible to bridge the gap between theory and practice. After the reform, Ukrainian Universities are enjoying a large degree of autonomy in curriculum design, so “in curriculum thinking, the focus is shifting from broad knowledge structures to demonstrable and assessable packages of learning outcomes, competencies and abilities” (Linden, Annala, & Coate, 2017, p.6). In making methodology choices and an opening way to improvement, the researchers may apply a survey (Hurlimann, 2009), action research (Junyent & Celi de Ciurana, 2008), or an interview (Bolander, et al., 2006) etc. According to Wahlström (2019), “a major task for curriculum theory is to identify the constraints that limit curriculum choices and to explore the pedagogic implications that follow” (Wahlström, 2019). Wahlström (2019) uses the term ‘powerful knowledge’ to denote the kind of knowledge that is highly valued in school and thus leads to the high-level achievement of objectives (Wahlström, 2019, p. 5). Thus, throughout our study, we will keep open the question of what forms of knowledge can be considered powerful in developing future teachers’ positive attitudes towards research within English for Academic Purposes course.

Methods

The presented research is mixed, with a combination of curriculum analysis (qualitative research) and questionnaire (quantitative research).

The purpose of the research was to identify the impact of English for Academic Purposes course on the future teachers’ attitudes toward research and their interest in educational research in the future.

The purpose-related *objectives* were:

- to design and carry out a survey of University master's students before and after the English for Academic Purposes course;
- to find out which parts of the course the students consider important for their motivation to take up research after their graduation;
- to draw conclusions on approaches which should be used in the design of curriculum and syllabus of English for Academic Purposes that would evolve an interest in the classroom and/ or academic research.

The research questions were:

- Which parts of the course do the students consider important for their motivation to take up research after their graduation?
- What future interventions should be implemented to address issues with the Academic English course to raise the interest of University students in research?

Participants

The authors draw their conclusions from quantitative research based on the questionnaire with 114 master's students majoring in teaching different school subjects (Ukrainian Language and Literature, History and Law, Sciences, Technologies, IT, Physical Education, Music, Arts, Mathematics, etc.) (see table 1). In the future, according to their career profile, they are supposed to become school teachers engaged in classroom research or proceed to post-graduate course dealing with an academic research project.

Table 1. *Profile of the survey participants*

	Age		Gender		Years of learning English		Language proficiency (self-assessment)						No self-assessment
	Up to 23	24 and more	Female	Male	5 – 12	11 – 16	A1	A2	B1	B2	C1	C2	
%	80,7	19,3	86	14	70,2	29,8	13,2	15,8	44,7	10,5			15,8
Number of participants	92	22	98	16	80	34	15	18	51	12			18

Ethical issues

Before participating in the survey the students were to get acquainted with the short questionnaire introduction saying that all personal data included in the survey results would remain confidential. Besides, the participation in the study was voluntary and they could withdraw from it at any stage.

Instrument and Procedures

We conducted the research in several steps in the period between September 2019 and June 2021 (two academic years). After reviewing the theoretical literature and many previous studies, and analysing educational programmes for training teachers, the authors of the article designed the questionnaire and proposed the students to fill it in online before studying the course. It consisted of 39 questions, with a preliminary indication of students' age, gender, speciality, duration of language learning, etc. Besides, the participants were to define their level of language proficiency by self-evaluation.

The research questions were grouped into 3 domains. The first part (general domain) was used to identify the students' major priorities for the course and to elicit obstacles to the successful mastering of its material. The second domain (research methodology) was to highlight the participants' attitudes toward conducting research. The questions of the third part (academic communication) helped to determine the level of awareness of the discipline's importance for successful professional and scientific communication activities.

After analysing the data, the research team who are teaching the course to Master students introduced minor changes in the curriculum taking into account the students' expectations. After the intervention in the form of delivering the EAP Course and checking the students' portfolios, the research team distributed another questionnaire. The key difference with the introductory inquiry form was that the items in domains 2 and 3 were corresponding to the learning outcomes of the course. After investigating the data that will be presented in the results part of the article, the authors build the discussion part over the forms of knowledge that can be considered powerful in developing future teachers' positive attitudes towards research within English for Academic Purposes course.

Results

The authors studied relations between the students' language proficiency level, the period of studying English, their majors, gender, age, and did not find any significant dependence, with a correlation quotient varying between -0,112 and 0,304 neither the ability to successfully perform different course tasks correlated with the students' positive attitudes towards the role of EAP for further research (between 0,016 and 0,41).

In the survey that was given before the course, the students defined the obstacles that could prevent them from mastering English. Among them, the top five problems identified by the students before the course were: (1) little time for learning the language (66,7 %); (2) difficulties in learning foreign languages (28,2 %); (3) a lot of material for autonomous learning (28,2 %); (4) ineffective teaching (7,7 %). The students' vision of the obstacles that prevented them from successful learning on the course changed significantly as the key positions they defined were: (1) insufficient proficiency in English (48,6 %); (2) few contact hours (21,6 %); (3) complex terminology (13,5 %); (4) the inefficiency of the curriculum (2,7 %).

The respondents also shared their attitudes towards EAP after the course which can be compared to those exposed before the course (see figure 1). The students formulated their attitudes towards EAP in terms of "I will need it for ..." phrases. The respondents could choose more than one variant.

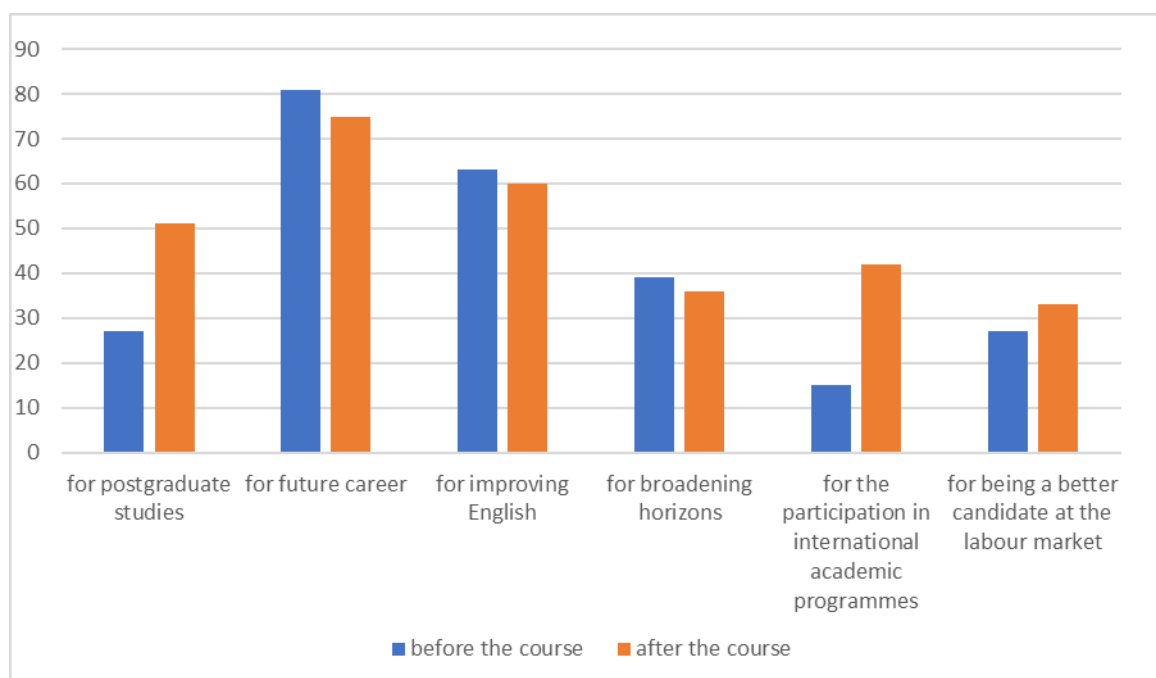


Figure 1. *The students' attitudes before and after the EAP course*

As the figure illustrates, if compared with the data received before the course, after it, there is a significant rise in the number of students who consider that they will need the knowledge and skills acquired in the EAP course for their postgraduate studies (51 vs 27), for the participation in international academic programmes (42 vs 15), and for being a better candidate at the labour market (33 vs 27) which supports the assumption that the EAP course has a positive influence on the students' attitudes towards educational research.

In addition, in both questionnaires, the respondents shared their vision of the importance of different parts of the EAP course for their further career, where 1 is 'Strongly unimportant', 2 is 'Unimportant', 3 is 'Neither important nor unimportant', 4 is 'Important' and 5 is 'Very important'. The mentioned skills are associated with the portfolio items as a task-based approach predominated in learning.

Table 2. *The students' vision of the importance of different parts of the EAP course for their further career*

	Skills	Before the course, %					After the course, %				
		1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
1.	Writing a motivation letter	-	-	28,9	42,2	28,9	2,7	2,7	16,3	40,5	37,8
2.	Writing a reference letter	-	5,3	21	26,3	47,4	-	2,7	8,1	27	62,2
3.	Writing a cover letter	-	2,6	31,7	36,8	28,9	-	-	13,5	43,3	43,2
4.	Writing an invitation letter	-	2,6	21,1	34,2	42,1	-	5,7	8,6	45,7	40
5.	Writing a complaint letter	-	5,3	34,2	26,3	34,2	16,2	10,8	24,3	37,8	10,9
6.	Filling in an application form	-	-	13,2	26,3	60,5	-	2,7	18,9	24,3	54,1
7.	Writing a CV	-	2,6	7,9	23,7	65,8	-	-	13,9	22,2	63,9
8.	Making an appointment	-	-	10,6	28,9	60,5	-	-	11,1	27,8	61,1
9.	Making an academic presentation	-	2,6	18,4	26,4	52,6	-	-	8,3	22,3	69,4

The figure below visualizes the percentage of future teachers who state that some thematical parts of the EAP course are 'important' and 'very important' for their further career (see figure 2).

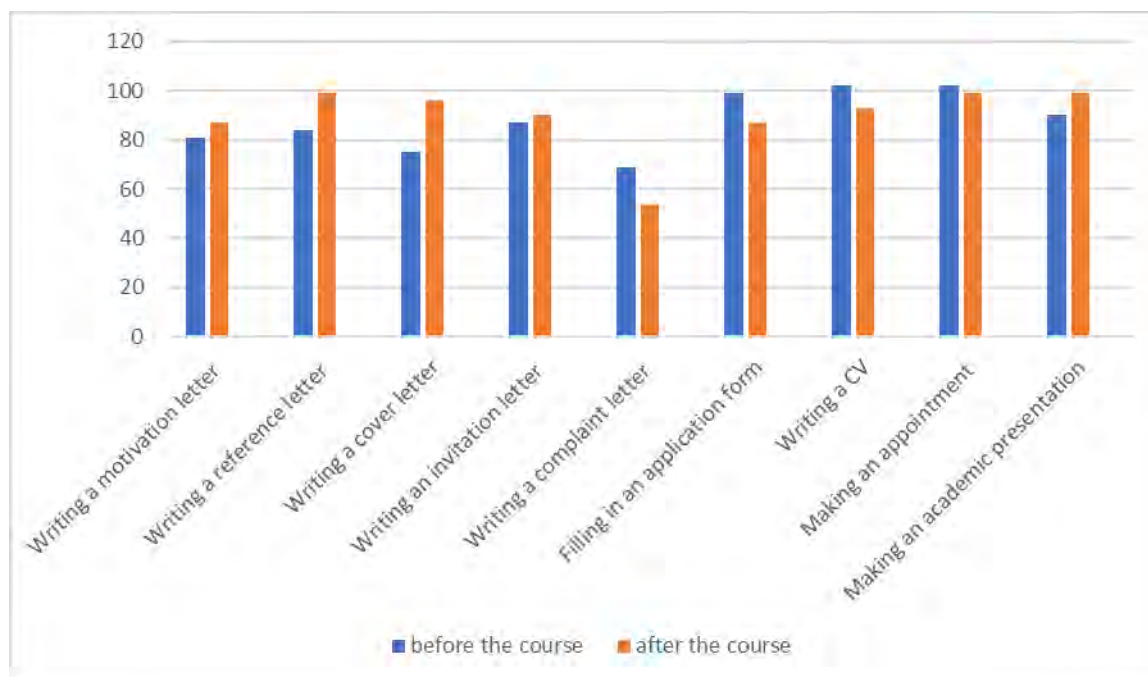


Figure 2. *The number of respondents who state that the following parts of the EAP course are important and very important for their career*

The study before and after the course demonstrates that although the students point to some previous experience of accomplishing the research tasks (writing letters, CVs etc.), they are aware of the importance of other course blocks for their successful professional and scientific communication activities. The respondents express their favourable attitudes to the parts connected with making academic presentations and writing different kinds of formal letters in their answers both before the course and after it. Such blocks as

writing a CV, filling out an application form, and making an appointment remain rather important for students' future career with a slight difference in percentage before and after the course, although a complaint letter takes the least significance in both cases. The number of respondents showing unawareness of the EAP blocks importance was lower after the course than before it.

The questionnaire was targeted at students' needs analysis of two types, namely target situation analysis and present situation analysis (Rao, 2018, p. 42) where target situation analysis deals with the students' future roles, both as teachers and educational researchers, while present situation analysis concerns "their present learning and the information about their current proficiencies and ambitions, revealing not only the "types of text assigned", but also the "reactions of students to assignments and the processes they go through in fulfilling them as well as faculty reactions to student participation and writing" (sited as in Rao, 2018, p. 42).

Also, the questionnaire contained some open-ended items focusing on the student views of the ways to improve the course. Most of the respondents (69%) are committed to having more contact hours with a teacher during an academic year, although some students (17,2%) see such course as optional in their pre-service teacher training. On the contrary, 87% of survey participants are satisfied with the course content and the classroom instruction (teaching methods, management strategies etc.). The students' poor willingness to work autonomously can be explained by different language proficiency (ranging between A 1 and B 2) of Master students studying the course at the same time (see table 1). As the preliminary research results show, the gap between the A 1 / A 2 level of language proficiency and the B 2-oriented course content causes substantial difficulties dealing with different zones of students' proximal development. Therefore, those with more developed language skills are more confident and motivated to take up research after their graduation.

Discussion

This research contextualizes the field of English for Academic Purposes, with a particular focus on the Master students' professional and academic identity and the role of the course in their making further career choices. The study contributes to "the accrual of 'cultural capital' through scholarship and research activity as a basis for establishing the identity and agency of the practitioner" (Ding & Bruce, 2017, p. 117). The authors of the article examine the previously neglected area of academic and employment contexts that are influenced by the course (Rao, 2018). The questionnaire can serve as a technique relevant for collecting information for the course design and improvement. Through it, the authors develop a better understanding of the students' expectations and constraints that may arise from this context, which in turn shape the students' intention either to take up a postgraduate course or carry out classroom research when they start teaching.

In answering the research question "Which parts of the course do the students consider important for their motivation to take up research after their graduation?" we would like to point out the importance of implying a task-based approach linked to the students' prior experience in research. In our view, the course should be more focused on the students' needs by eliminating the items from a broader context, e.g. complaint letters. Moreover, the course materials should rely on a cross-content perspective establishing a connection with other research-related courses from the Master programme.

The future interventions to address issues with the Academic English course to raise the interest of University students should deal with restructuring the course in a way that the student should have more contact hours. The analysis of learning materials designed for EAP course shows that most of them (Jordan, 1997; Graham, 2018; Charles & Pecorari, 2015) introduce students to theory- and research-informed perspectives and guide them in putting theory to use in real-world contexts which would be impossible in 30 contact hours as in the analysed case. Moreover, it should be linked to the students' school practice and their small-scale research in real classroom settings.

Conclusions

To sum up, the EAP course has played a role in building the students' confidence and maintaining interest in research. The skills developed by the course are viewed by the students as important in their further teaching or post-graduate research. Nevertheless, the authors have defined some issues for improving the course in terms of restructuring it and modifying the content taking into account the students' needs and their language proficiency levels.

Further cycles of action research are important to investigate students' motivation to take up research after the intervention and introduce changes in the curriculum. However, the results may depend on the students' profile and thus require considerable change in research methodology in the next research cycle.

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